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New Orleans' Plasterers' Union Local 93: Afro-Creole Identity, Family and Organized Labor,
1898-1954

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

Darryl G. Barthé, Jr.

B.A. University of New Orleans, 1996

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ABSTRACT

The Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons International Union Local 93 was founded as a racially integrated union in New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century. The Union was established by Irish Americans and New Orleans Afro-Creoles and represents a continuation of an Afro-Creole protest tradition that had existed since the eighteenth century in Louisiana. The cooperation between these Irish and Afro-Creole plasterers represented a social sodality of working class whites and bourgeois Afro-Creoles who defied social convention for mutual benefit. Through Local 93, Afro-Creoles were able to assert their political equality with whites and Irish Americans were able to engage in a sophisticated trade that had been traditionally dominated by Afro-Creoles in New Orleans. After almost a half-century of restricting union membership to whites and Afro-Creoles (typically restricting membership to the family of current union members), Local 93 experienced more thorough racial integration, allowing African Americans to join the union.

CHAPTER I

LOCAL 93: AN AFRO-CREOLE UNION

The Operative Plasterers' and Cement Masons' International Association of the United States and Canada, Local No. 93 in New Orleans was founded in 1901 as a racially integrated union just as Jim Crow hardened lines between blacks and whites Louisiana. The first president of the union local, Pierre (Peter) Barthé, was a descendant of New Orleans' *gens de couleur libres*, or free people of color. Fully integrated from its inception, this union provides a view of uncommon cooperation between Afro-Creoles and working-class whites in New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century. The Operative Plasterers' International Union (OPIU) became affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1908, which suggests that New Orleans' Local 93 was among the earliest, if not the first, of the racially integrated AFL-affiliated locals in the United States featuring blacks in positions of union leadership.

Today, the founding of Local 93 is a subject of emerging interest, in part due to the efforts of the great-nephew of Pierre Barthé. Earl A. Barthé is a Master Plasterer and was the president of Local 93 from 1972 until 1986. He is an inductee in the Louisiana AFL-CIO Labor Hall of Fame, a fellow of the National Endowment of the Arts, and an historian of the plastering trade in New Orleans. Earl A. Barthé recounted the founding of Local 93 in a 2007 interview:

Peter Barthé, my great-grand uncle was the organizer with Sam Ball, who was white. Barthé was working on the St. Louis Cathedral and Ball was working next door on the museum and they had a problem, I think on the museum. So, at twelve o'clock they would just talk about their problems and what-not and, to make a long story short, they realized that they had the talent. Now, I want you to remember, this is 1898. You know

the racial things of that time...So, they decided that they wanted to join together and put that talent together. So Peter, in 1898, he wrote to the International Union in Washington to organize the plasterers in New Orleans....From 1898 to 1901, they was trying to get the Union in, and in Washington, they wouldn't let them organize because they were of two races. But Peter Barthé and Ball, they stood together and decided they would have one union or none....In 1901, Peter was the President and Ball was the Vice-President....There was too much talent to let it go. New Orleans produced the finest plasterers in the country.¹

The story told by Earl A. Barthé is certainly compelling. However, the vagaries and inconsistencies of the paradigm of race in America and the often arbitrary definitions of “whiteness” and “blackness,” particularly in New Orleans amongst mixed-race Afro-Creoles, makes a closer look at Local 93 necessary if an accurate understanding of the interracial nature of the union is to be gleaned from the facts. If “blackness” is defined as having any trace of African ancestry whatsoever (the “one-drop rule”), then Local 93 was racially integrated—white and black—in 1901. Yet, the “one drop rule” was not a racial convention native to Louisiana, and in 1901 “blackness” for many “colored people” in New Orleans was negotiable (and negotiated) in court.²

The economic power that accompanied the intellectual capital of Creole plastering made it possible for petite-bourgeois Afro-Creoles to negotiate as equals (indeed, if not as superiors) with working-class Irish Americans who offered an immigrant work ethic, a commitment to self-improvement, and, perhaps most importantly, the privilege of their whiteness. However, the Afro-Creoles possessed the capital and the historical and familial connections to the city that

¹ Earl A. Barthé, "Interview 5.30.07," *Rebuilding New Orleans One Voice at a Time: Earl A. Barthé*, (New Orleans: New Orleans PodCasting, 2007), quicktime podcast, <http://neworleanspodcasting.com/EarlBarthé.shtml/> (accessed March 20, 2009).

² Virginia Dominguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

these Irish Americans lacked. Given their history of agitation for political equality, Afro-Creoles seemingly could not abide the more common, biracial union model. Characterized by black subservience to white social superiority, the traditional form of racial alliance across the color line in New Orleans was almost certainly never an option. Afro-Creoles had the power and resources to refuse segregation in their workplace, or rather, define the terms of racial segregation. Therefore, Local 93 would be integrated in that white and Afro-Creole families seemingly worked as equals; however, these families agreed upon a form of exclusion that barred African-Americans until the late 1940s. This study examines the tradition of Afro-Creole resistance beyond the more familiar legal sphere by following one group of skilled craftsmen into the economic realm during the Jim Crow period. Afro-Creole plasterers found a way to maintain their generations of dominance within an essential part of the New Orleans labor market despite increasing social and legal constraints. Afro-Creole plasterers managed to negotiate many of their own terms to participation in the segregated labor market.

Afro-Creole plasterers had little reason to accept a subordinate role in Local 93. The fact that Pierre Barthé emerges as the first President of the union suggests that if the union was founded on cooperative problem solving, as Earl A. Barthé suggests, it is likely that the Barthé's represented the distributing end of any exchange of expertise. If white workers saw black unskilled workers as a potential threat to their economic security, it is clear that they did not perceive these Afro-Creole skilled workers in the same way. In fact, it is easier to conceive the opposite as true.

Furthermore, given the exclusion of African Americans from membership in Local 93 for the first half of its history, it is very likely that Afro-Creole skilled workers perceived unskilled African-American labor in much the same terms that white workers perceived unskilled African-

American labor. Though “black” according to American racial paradigms, Afro-Creoles in New Orleans considered themselves separate from African Americans, or “American negroes” as they were referred to in the parlance of the time.

CHAPTER II

THE BARTHÉ FAMILY: NEW ORLEANS AFRO-CREOLES

Traces of the three-tiered racial caste system as practiced in the rest of Latin America—white, mixed race and black—lingered in New Orleans for more than a century after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. In New Orleans, there were whites and blacks, but there was also a significant population of mixed-race people who regarded themselves as a separate ethno-cultural group whose racial identity was fluid and often subject to arbitration. These Afro-Creoles distinguished themselves from African Americans through language, religion and a Latin culture, all of which were legacies of the colonial era.

With this complex ethno-racial history in mind, it is perhaps more accurate to describe Local 93 as an interracial union insofar as it was composed of whites and mixed-race Afro-Creoles, rather than describing Local 93 as a fully integrated union composed of whites and African Americans. In fact, Local 93 denied union membership to African Americans for almost a half-century after its founding. Taken in the context of the sometimes radical organized labor movement that swept the South during the Reconstruction era, Local 93 could be understood as a vehicle of working-class empowerment, especially for Irish immigrants and Irish Americans who were often marginalized in comparable fashion to African Americans. For Afro-Creoles, however, the union functioned more as a bourgeois institution of economic protectionism that they used to exploit (at times in monopolistic fashion) the intellectual capital of their technique

and skill. Unarguably, Local 93 represents a modern-era manifestation of an “Afro-Creole protest tradition” in Louisiana that began during the French colonial period when a man could be involuntarily stripped of his autonomy and labor through the state-sanctioned institution of slavery.³

Afro-Creole free people of color in New Orleans have been the subject of a number of studies over the last twenty years. Among the most important of these studies is *Creole New Orleans*, edited by Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall’s contribution to *Creole New Orleans*, “The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture,” presents, in an abridged form, the foundation of her own more extensive treatment, also published in 1992, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*.⁴ Hall describes the culture of Afro-Creoles in Louisiana as “firmly established by the time the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803.”⁵ Most importantly, Hall connects New Orleans’ Afro-Creole to the Atlantic World, and specifically to the culture of the Caribbean and Latin America.

The relatively recent emergence of “whiteness studies” in the last twenty years has only begun to scratch the surface of the American paradigm of race. Scholars like David Roediger and Ruth Frankenberg have changed the terms of the dialogue on race through their deconstruction of race into the simplest terms: empowered (“white”) and disempowered (“black” or “non-white”).

³ Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997)

⁴ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, pp. 58-87, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 59.

While useful, even these descriptors fall short when examining free people of color, the “third tier” of the racial culture of Atlantic slavery.

Depending on time, place, and circumstances, free people of color could often be perceived as either black, white, or “colored.” Free people of color were politically disenfranchised, but they could bring suit against whites in court. They have been described as “slaves without masters,” yet some of them were slave owners themselves.⁶ Their liberty often rested on scraps of paper declaring their free status, yet they could own property and conduct private business.⁷ Often characterized as untrustworthy, ignoble, internally conflicted and essentially tragic figures when discussed at all,⁸ free people of color—many of whom (especially free women of color) were capable of moving between the “white world” and “black world”—represented a real and ever-present threat to an Anglo-American social order predicated on racial division and separation.

Mary Niall Mitchell begins and ends her work, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future After Slavery*, with an analysis of a photograph of two recently emancipated slave children from New Orleans named Isaac and Rosa. Isaac is a very dark-skinned child with distinctly African features. Rosa is a fair-skinned child with distinctly European features. Mitchell raises a number of provocative questions in her analysis of this

⁶ Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: The New Press, 1974) and Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984).

⁷ Rebecca J. Scott, "Public Rights and Private Commerce: A Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Creole Itinerary," *Current Anthropology* 48, no. 2 (April 2007)

⁸ Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859; reprint, New York: Vintage, 2002) is a good example of the archetype of the tragic mulatto, or in this case, mulattress.

picture. “Light-skinned girls like Rosa...seemed to foreshadow the blurring of racial categories (such that “white” people might be enslaved if slavery continued) and the difficulty of classification once “white”-looking slaves became free.”⁹ This blurring of racial categories made the world of the “one drop rule” a confidence game at best and, at worst, it exposed the paradigm of American racial categorization as the arbitrary and capricious institution that it was.

Plessy v. Ferguson of 1896 was perhaps the most important Supreme Court case involving Jim Crow laws until their eventual repeal in 1954, in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. In the sole dissenting opinion against establishing the legal principle of “separate but equal,” Justice John Marshall Harlan described America in ideal terms when he suggested that “in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here.”¹⁰ The harsh reality communicated by the near unanimous verdict of the Supreme Court in *Plessy* was that, in fact, there was caste in the United States.

Plessy vs. Ferguson is taught in the United States, typically, as the test case which allowed Jim Crow to grow and fester. However, what is often omitted from the standard narrative is that Homer Plessy, an Afro-Creole from New Orleans, was phenotypically “white.” It was precisely for this reason that Plessy was chosen to challenge the law which demanded that whites and blacks be separated in railway cars.¹¹ In the language of the time, Homer Plessy was

⁹ Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future After Slavery* (New York: New York University, 2008), 7.

¹⁰ J. Harlan, "Harlan, J., Dissenting Opinion, Supreme Court of the United States 163 US 537, *Plessy Vs. Ferguson*," Cornell University Law School, http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0163_0537_ZD.html (accessed February 1, 2009).

¹¹ Charles A. Lofgren, *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 47-56.

an “octoroon” which meant being “1/8th black,” or rather, having one great grandparent who was black.

In giving the majority opinion of the court in *Plessy*, Justice Brown affirms the liability of a railway employee in incorrectly determining the race of a passenger.¹² However, since Plessy self-identified as a “colored” man, this was not a deciding issue to the case. Brown went on to suggest that if there is an implication of black inferiority in mandatory separation of the races, it is because black people project a sense of inferiority upon themselves that has nothing to do with white people or the wishes of white people to be segregated from black people. Finally, Brown does offer Homer Plessy the advice to challenge his “blackness” under the law in Louisiana.¹³

Plessy never bothered to challenge his blackness. Though Afro-Creoles distinguished themselves from African Americans, the distinction was more often framed in terms of culture than race. His suit had been brought to challenge the segregationist laws that aimed to erect a *de jure* wall of separation between whites and blacks, not to challenge his own racial designation. The legally sanctioned caste system in America would be challenged repeatedly before it would finally begin to collapse with the decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. It is important to understand that many of these challenges were raised by Afro-Creoles in New Orleans, and that this history of challenging Anglo-American cultural domination and racial oppression is a part of

¹² In this way, the court affirms peril and liability in categorizing someone incorrectly even though it admits that, in practice, individual employees of the railroad (e.g. ticket sellers, conductors) are empowered to determine the race of patrons. Whites may have been empowered to discriminate against blacks, so long as the blacks they were discriminating against were indeed black. Guessing incorrectly could be construed, according to Judge Brown, as depriving a man of his property (i.e. his “whiteness” and all privileges due to his white status).

¹³ J. Brown, "Brown, J., Opinion Of The Court, Supreme Court Of The United States, 163 US 537, *Plessy Vs. Ferguson*," Cornell University Law School, http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0163_0537_ZO.html. (accessed February 1, 2009).

a much larger history and protest tradition of Afro-Creole people in New Orleans and Louisiana. Local 93 is a part of that history.

Differences in language, religion and culture separated Afro-Creoles from African Americans. Historical privilege afforded to mixed-race people under the French and the Spanish had allowed Afro-Creoles to forge for themselves a “third tier,” a caste designation between Anglo-American whites and Anglo-American blacks in New Orleans. Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell’s contribution to *Creole New Orleans* is “The Americanization of Black New Orleans 1850-1900,” in which the authors examine this division. According to Logsdon and Bell, the people of this third tier were often educated, were often skilled tradesmen and many owned property which introduced a class dynamic that placed some Afro-Creoles at a material advantage when compared to working-class whites.¹⁴

Logsdon and Bell isolate core concepts of the “Latin Negro” and the “Anglo-Saxon or American Negro” (concepts originally articulated by Afro-Creole scholar Rudolph Desdunes) in their description of the clash of ethnicities among Afro-Creoles and African Americans. While differences in language and culture may have separated the two, however, it is clear that all of these people (under the American racial caste system) were “black.” Logsdon and Bell suggest that “in crucial struggles during Reconstruction, black leaders transcended their ethnic differences and helped to forge a new identity as free men and citizens not just for themselves but for all persons of African descent in the United States.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992)

¹⁵ *Ibid* p. 204

Antebellum New Orleans, according to Logsdon and Bell, experienced a steady influx of immigrants, many of whom were from France or French-speaking colonies in the Caribbean. This influx had a number of effects on New Orleans Creole culture. First, it allowed for the spread of the revolutionary political ideals of the French Revolution (“Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood”) and, closer to home, the Haitian Revolution. Second, this influx reinforced the Latin culture of Louisiana and thus allowed for more fluid applications of racial designation and less oppressive social relationships.¹⁶

This French political and cultural influence (and their influence in informing the demands of Louisiana’s free people of color for political equality) in New Orleans is the focus of Caryn Cossé Bell’s *Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana 1718-1868* published in 1997. Bell begins her work by communicating the sense of urgency Louisiana’s first American governor, W. C. C. Claiborne must have felt in coming to terms with the free black population of the territory that the United States had recently acquired as a result of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. New Orleans’ Afro-Creoles understood well enough the delicate line they walked between freedom and slavery, and they were determined from the onset, according to Bell, to declare their interests to their new American sovereigns.¹⁷

Pierre Barthé’s family, though partially of African descent, had been free for more than a half-century before Jefferson purchased Louisiana from Napoleon Bonaparte. Pierre Barthé’s family history begins in New Orleans with a 1752 marriage record between two free people of

¹⁶ *Ibid* . 204-208.

¹⁷ Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition* . 8-11.

color, Jean Barthé and Elizabeth Lavergne.¹⁸ The next of Pierre's ancestors to surface is also a marriage record from 1784 between their son, also named Jean, and a woman named Elizabetha Coullion.¹⁹ Afro-Creole free people of color, like Pierre's ancestor Jean Barthé, approached Governor Claiborne in an attempt to declare their interests in 1803. Though these declarations were unfortunately met and dealt with "in the Anglo-American mode of exclusion" (in the words historian Jerah Johnson), Afro-Creoles continued to pursue any of a number of avenues available to them for upward social mobility and, eventually, political equality.²⁰

There were a number of paths available to free people of color for upward social mobility in New Orleans, especially prior to the Louisiana Purchase, during the time of French and Spanish colonial domination. Acquiring property (including slaves) was one path. Acquisition of trade skills represented another more common path to higher social status.

In the early 1800's, New Orleans experienced an influx of refugees from Saint Domingue who were fleeing the Haitian Revolution. Many of these people were described in 1809 by New Orleans Mayor James Mather in a letter to governor Claiborne as being propertied and possessing "useful trades to live upon."²¹ Though Claiborne was loath to allow these refugees to

¹⁸ Louisiana Marriages 1718-1925 [database online].The Generations Network, Inc. 2004, <http://www.ancestry.com/> (Louisiana Marriages 1718-1925 for Jean Barthé and Elizabeth Lavergne).

¹⁹ Louisiana Marriages 1718-1925 [database online].The Generations Network, Inc. 2004, <http://www.ancestry.com/> (Louisiana Marriages 1718-1925 for Jean Barthé and Elizabetha Coullion).

²⁰ Jerah Johnson, "Colonial New Orleans," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 56.

²¹ James Mather, "Letter from James Mather to William Claiborne, New Orleans, July 18, 1809," Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816, Vol. 4 (New York Public Library: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture),

remain in Louisiana, the Francophone Creole population, whose perceived self-interest did not necessarily coincide with Claiborne's ("the Americans"), welcomed the influx of refugees, most of whom settled in New Orleans.²² "The 1809 migration brought 2,731 whites, 3,102 free persons of African descent, and 3,226 enslaved refugees to the city, doubling its population. Sixty-three percent of Crescent City inhabitants were now black."²³ This welcoming of the refugees of Saint Domingue by the Louisiana Creole community was, at least in part, in response to the perception that their own elite status (at least in the case of white Creoles) was threatened by Anglo-American invaders and occupiers. The importance of perceived commonality with these immigrants, including a shared language and religion, cannot be overstated. These refugees settled in New Orleans' French Quarter, Faubourg Marigny, Faubourg Tremé and eventually New Orleans' Seventh Ward and became assimilated into the city's pre-existing Creole community. Partially as a result of this influx, free people of color would gradually come to dominate a number of skilled trades (including plastering) in New Orleans by the end of the nineteenth century. It is worth noting that although the Barthé family can be traced at least to 1752, the first plasterer in the family does not appear until a century later. It is quite possible that

http://www.inmotionaame.org/texts/viewer.cfm?id=5_012T&page=1&bhcp=1/ (accessed March 20, 2009).

²² W.C.C Claiborne, "Letter from William Claiborne to William Savage, New Orleans, November 10, 1809," *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*, Vol. 5 (New York Public Library: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), http://www.inmotionaame.org/texts/viewer.cfm?id=5_011T&page=1 (accessed March 20, 2009).

²³ *New York Public Library Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture*, "Haitian Immigration: 18th And 19th Centuries," <http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/topic.cfm?migration=5&topic=3/> (accessed March 21, 2009).

the Barthé family's introduction to the plastering trade could be directly attributed to this influx of skilled artisans among the free people of color who arrived from Saint Domingue.

Perhaps, for Claiborne, these newcomers represented a threat to the process of Americanization. With their French language, their Roman Catholicism and their Latin mentalities and traditions, these immigrants could easily have represented a step in the wrong direction: a step away from Anglo-American hegemony, the United States' "Manifest Destiny," that informed the decision to purchase the Louisiana Territory in the first place. Perhaps Claiborne feared a spread of revolutionary ideas which could serve as precursors to eruptions of violence and insurrection. That would not have been an unreasonable fear, either.

The fact that many of these people had prior military experience was a valid cause of concern. The brutal institution of slavery made violence in slave societies inevitable and the dreadful specter of former slaves arming themselves and turning on their would-be masters was an ever-present threat to social order. Indeed, the largest slave rebellion (and one of the bloodiest) in American history took place in Louisiana in 1811. According to Adam Rothman in his book *Slave Country*, it seems that of these rebels, "most of the leaders appear to have been Creoles and mulattoes."²⁴

Military service was another avenue open to free people of color for social advancement in colonial Louisiana during the period of French and Spanish control. Though their loyalty was often questioned, and though many Anglo-Americans openly questioned the wisdom of arming potentially rebellious free people of color, many Afro-Creoles served in the military in the early

²⁴ Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 111.

American period in Louisiana in the hopes that their actions might serve to advance their agenda of equality. Pierre Barthé's grandfather, Jean Barthé (the younger), was one of these men.

Jean Barthé turns up in military records as a member of Fortier's 1st Battalion Louisiana Militia, comprised of free men of color who fought for the Americans at the Battle of New Orleans.²⁵ Certainly, many Creoles in New Orleans may have just as well preferred to see the British victorious at the battle of New Orleans, fought at the close of the War of 1812.²⁶ It is worth noting that many of the family names of free black militia volunteers in Bell's work are also to be found throughout the records of Local 93 at UNO Special Collections, including the names Dolliole, Daunoy and Porée. Though unlikely, it is possible that Jean was motivated by a sense of patriotism. More likely, he fought for his own home and family. Perhaps he fought in the hope that by his sacrifice, he might secure his liberty and that of his children in the face of an encroaching Anglo-American social order that sought to blur the distinction between himself and a slave.

During the American Civil War, Jean Barthé's son, also named Jean Barthé, appears with his son Antoine (Pierre Barthé's father), as a member of the 1st Louisiana Native Guard, a Confederate military unit comprised of free men of color.²⁷ The motives for these Native

²⁵ Marion John Bennett Pierson, *Louisiana Soldiers in the War of 1812* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Genealogical and Historical Society, 1963), 7.

²⁶ H.W. Brands, *Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 249-252; also on page 341 of Charles Gayarré's *History of Louisiana*, Gayarré quotes a letter from Claiborne to Andrew Jackson as "With a population differing in language, customs, manners, and *sentiments*, you need not be surprised if I should not with entire certainty calculate on the support of the people." Caryn Cossé Bell gives a more detailed account of this in *Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro Creole Protest Tradition* between pages 48-60.

²⁷ *The Louisiana Native Guards*, "Muster Roll Of The Native Guards, C.S.A.," <http://www2.netdoor.com/~jgh/roll1.html> (accessed October 9, 2008).

Guardsmen were varied. Surely, some hoped to profit through their military service as their fathers and grandfathers before them had. Others truly identified with white southerners in New Orleans, and at least a few of their number were slave owners themselves. Yet, it cannot be overlooked that some of these men felt compelled to serve out of a fear of appearing disloyal.²⁸

In James Hollandsworth's treatment of the Louisiana Native Guard, he quotes an 1859 editorial of the *Daily Picayune* that attempts to illustrate the connection between New Orleans' free people of color and the larger white community as such:

Our free colored population forms a distinct class from those elsewhere in the United States. Far from being antipathetic to whites, they have followed in their footsteps, and progressed with them, with a commendable spirit of emulation, in the various branches of industry most adopted to their sphere. Some of our best mechanics and artisans are to be found among the free colored men. They form the great majority of our regular, settled masons, bricklayers, builders, carpenters, tailors, shoemakers etc whose sudden emigration from this community would certainly be attended with some degree of annoyance... whilst we count among them in no small numbers, excellent musicians, jewelers, goldsmiths, tradesmen and merchants. As a general rule, the free colored people of Louisiana, and especially of New Orleans—the “Creole colored people,” as they style themselves—are a sober, industrious and moral class, far advanced in education and civilization.²⁹

This article was written in response to a fear that free people of color who served as a vital component of the city's economy were emigrating for Haiti due to the oppression and racism that they were forced to endure at home, in New Orleans. It did not take long for fear and alarm to translate into resentment and disdain, however. These flattering words would not represent the final commentary on New Orleans' Afro-Creoles, either.

²⁸ Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 231-233.

²⁹ “Hayti and Immigration Thither,” New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, July 16, 1859, quoted by James G. Hollandsworth, *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 5-6.

Many of the free men of color that joined the Native Guard had done so out of fear of losing their property or their lives, or both. Some guardsmen joined because they honestly feared the consequences of a Northern army ravaging their homes. However, some feared (perhaps even more so) the ire of white southerners who questioned their loyalty to the Confederate cause. They certainly were no strangers to public derision when, upon the fall of New Orleans, these Native Guardsmen promptly switched sides and became a Union regiment.

Upon the Guard's donning the Union standard, pro-Confederate Roman Catholic clergymen of New Orleans would soon reward these free men of color for their industry, morality, education and civility by withholding of the sacrament of Holy Communion—in effect, a localized excommunication.³⁰ Such a punishment (a judgment of eternal damnation according to Roman Catholic doctrine of the time) would have been hard to bear for people whose ethnic identity included a strong Roman Catholic religious affiliation.

When the Roman Catholic Church in New Orleans condemned these Afro-Creole men for taking action to secure their own liberty and to promote their equality with whites, some Afro-Creoles responded by turning away from the Church altogether. Some, like Antoine Barthé, turned to Freemasonry. To this day, there are some within the Roman Catholic Church who maintain that for a Roman Catholic to become associated with a Masonic lodge is to self-excommunicate from the Church.³¹ Given the state of Church doctrine at the time, Antoine

³⁰ Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 231-244.

³¹ In May 2008, Archbishop of Ozamis, Archbishop Jesus A. Dosado, reiterated a position suggesting that upon joining a Masonic lodge, a Catholic should be refused all sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, including the Last Rites and Christian burial. Though the Second Ecumenical Council, commonly referred to as Vatican II, seemed to veer away from this point of doctrine, in place since Clement XII's *In Eminenti*, published April 28, 1738, Archbishop Dosado's interpretation of canon law was validated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the office of the Vatican that "replaced" the office of the Holy Inquisition and that was

Barthé's association with a Masonic lodge represented a radical ideological departure from the conservative Catholic faith he had been baptized into.

Caryn Cossé Bell observes that “in Reconstruction Louisiana, French freemasons and their Creole allies would push masonry's ideal of fraternity to its fullest expression” through the establishment of a racially integrated Masonic lodge called Fraternite #20.³² The meeting minutes for the lodge show Antoine Barthé as a member from January 1871 to at least February of 1873.³³ Though the Barthés would come back to the Church eventually, their encounters with French Freemasonry and its ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity would certainly leave their mark, ideologically.

Antoine's occupation was listed in the 1870 census as “Cooper” (a barrel-maker). He shared his home with his wife, Soluse Barthé, and their children: Antoine Dieudonne Barthé, listed in the same census as “shoemaker”; Leon Barthé, who was the first plasterer in the family; and Pierre, or as he was more commonly known, Peter Barthé.³⁴

Antoine's home at 423 St. Louis Street, belonged to Soluse Barthé and was worth \$1900 in 1870. Kimberly S. Hanger notes that in New Orleans, “more free black women held property

headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger before he was elected Pope Benedict XVI). For more on this, see <http://www.cbcnews.com/?q=node/2591> (accessed March 21, 2009).

³² Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 186.

³³ Journal of meeting minutes, George Longe papers 1768-1971, Amistad Research Center, Box 41, F-15, pages 208-269.

³⁴ United States Federal Census 1870 [database online], (Ancestry.com), <http://www.ancestry.com/> (1870 United States Federal Census about Antoine Barthé; accessed October 9, 2008).

than did free black men and that property was more valuable.”³⁵ Together, Antoine and Soluse represent a picture of petite-bourgeois New Orleans Afro-Creoles that provides an interesting contrast with the circumstances of the Irish-immigrant family of Sam Ball, Local 93’s first Vice-President.

CHAPTER III SAM BALL AND THE WHITENESS OF THE IRISH

Samuel Ball was the son of a laborer, Simon Ball, and his wife, Jane Ball. Simon and Jane were working-class immigrants who arrived in New Orleans from Ireland in the 1850’s.³⁶ In *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White*, David Roediger describes the Irish as “the slowest to become white of the ‘old’ immigrants.” Again, only when the concept of “whiteness” is divorced from physical characteristics and phenotypes, and is used purely to describe one’s relationship to power, does this statement make any sense. Though pale skin, blue or green eyes and red hair have come to represent the archetypical physical qualities of “Irish-ness,” according to Roediger, the “whiteness” of the Irish was a subject of fierce contention in the 1840’s and 1850’s.³⁷

³⁵ Kimberly S. Hanger, "Landlords, Shopkeepers, Farmers, and Slave Owners: Free Black Female Property-Holders in Colonial New Orleans," in *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar & Darlene Clarke Hine (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 221.

³⁶ 1860 United States Federal Census [database on-line], (Ancestry.com), <http://www.ancestry.com/> (1860 Federal Census about Simon Ball; accessed February 1, 2009). There is no census entry for either Simon or Jane Ball in the 1850 Census report for New Orleans.

³⁷ David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 51, 62-65.

The miserable conditions in Ireland that resulted from the Potato Famine of 1845, combined with oppressive Anglo-colonial statutes preventing the Irish from fully engaging their economy, resulted in more than 750,000 dead, with countless more forced to abandon their homeland for North America.³⁸ Irish immigrants, the proverbial huddled masses of wretched refuse, eventually settled in American cities like Boston, New York and New Orleans where they struggled to eke out a living for themselves.

These Irish immigrants were introduced to the institution of American racism very early on. Randall M. Miller suggests that “immigrants’ willingness to engage in work that Southern whites considered fit only for slaves blurred distinctions between white and black, free and slave.”³⁹ The Irish experience was not so dissimilar to that of African Americans’ in that they were often stereotyped as animalistic, lazy, deficient in intellect, savage and violent. In short, the Irish were regarded (at least by many Anglo-American elites) as little more than “white niggers.”⁴⁰ This view was often supported using the same type of racist pseudo-science that was used to justify and promote the oppression of African Americans.

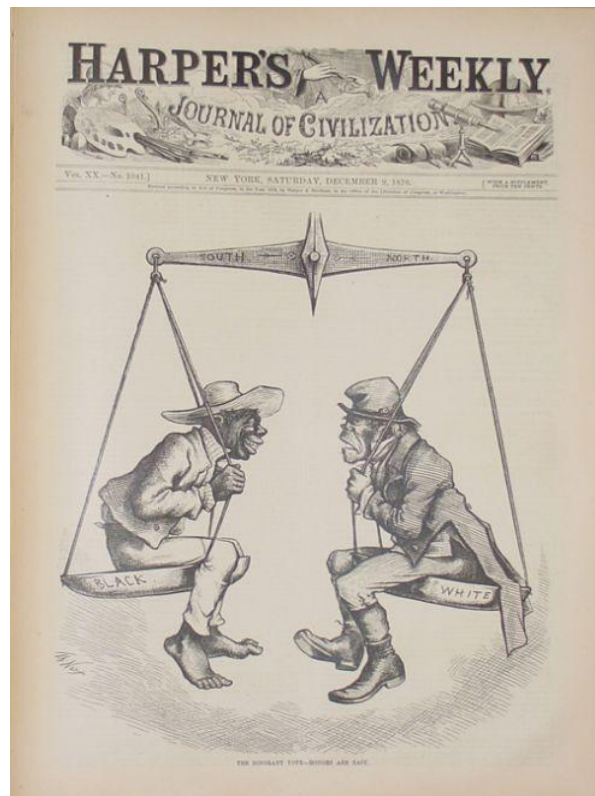
The image following is a cover illustration by Thomas Nast for *Harper’s Weekly* published on December 9, 1876 called “The Ignorant Vote.” The illustration consists of a racist caricature of an African-American man sitting on one side of a balance scale staring across at an

³⁸ S. Mintz, "The Irish Potato Famine," *Digital History*, May 3, 2009, http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/irish_potato_famine.cfm/ (accessed May 2, 2009).

³⁹ Randall M. Miller, "The Enemy Within: Some Effects of Foreign Immigrants on Antebellum Southern Cities," in *The Making of Urban America*, ed. Raymond A. Mohl (Lanham: SR Books, 1997), 59.

⁴⁰ George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 140-150.

equally racist caricature of an Irishman. The scales hang in balance as the stereotype of the African-American (sitting on the side of the scale labeled “south”) meets the stereotype of the angry, ape-like Irishman (who sits on the other side of the scale labeled “north”). The image implies equality between the Irish and African Americans, though that equality is a function of suffering inflicted upon the two groups by Anglo-American white elites.



(Fig. 1)

Though they were regarded in a similar fashion by white elites, African Americans and recently immigrated Irish did not typically engage one another in solidarity. Indeed, the relationship between the two groups was marked by fierce competition for jobs especially after the Civil War when many African Americans poured into cities after leaving the plantations

where they had been enslaved. This economic competition often promoted conflict between the two groups and this conflict would often be expressed in terms of racial antipathy and hatred as the Irish, “eagerly, militantly, and loudly white, even and especially when not broadly accepted as such,”⁴¹ attempted to distance themselves from African Americans and, through Americanization, promote their group identification with Anglo-American white ethnics.

Until properly “Americanized,” the status of a working-class Irishman (or Irishwoman) in the middle of the nineteenth century in New Orleans was probably not so unlike the “third tier” status of free people of color. Born in 1854, Sam Ball almost certainly experienced, if not the same sense of racial “in between-ness” that Afro-Creoles experienced, then at least a similar sense of ethnic marginalization. Still, this shared marginalization cannot fully explain the interracial cooperation that manifested as Local 93.

When issues of class are taken into consideration, one is left with very awkward questions. The Irish, once properly Americanized, could be considered white. However, one could still be white and poor. Was it better to be white and poor or black and economically self-sufficient? For some Irish-Americans in New Orleans, joining together with petite-bourgeois Afro-Creole plasterers represented the opportunity to lift themselves up from the proletarian masses of unskilled labor into the middle class, thus realizing the “American Dream” of achieving both “whiteness” (i.e. political empowerment) and economic self-sufficiency.

In 1900, Sam Ball resided in a working-class neighborhood, New Orleans’ Third Ward, on S. Rocheblave Street near Tulane Avenue. Kimberly S. Hanger specifically mentions that only one hundred years prior, more than a fourth of the houses in New Orleans’ Third Ward were

⁴¹ Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 123.

owned by free women of color and that many of those were rental properties.⁴² Ball rented his home where he lived with his wife and their eight children. The census lists his race as “white” and his ethnicity as “American.” Many of his neighbors were listed as “black” and were from the American South (mostly Louisiana, though some are listed as having been born in Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee). Of his “white” neighbors, many were immigrants from Ireland and Italy.⁴³

In 1900, according to the census, Sam Ball was considered both American and “white,” yet Ball’s own perceived material interests were apparently not served by Jim Crow legislation that mandated racial segregation in Louisiana. This was despite whatever privilege he may have experienced as a result of his whiteness. By throwing in his lot with petite-bourgeois Afro-Creoles, Ball was able to ply a trade that had been traditionally dominated by Afro-Creoles and jealously guarded in the late nineteenth century through protective trade union organizing in New Orleans.

CHAPTER IV

ORGANIZED LABOR IN CREOLE NEW ORLEANS

Though Earl A. Barthé attributes the Barthés’ entry into organized labor to Pierre, evidence suggests that this distinction belonged to Leon Barthé, Pierre’s older brother who was born in 1845. The 1880 census lists Leon as married to Evelina Barthé, with whom he had four children, the oldest of whom was also named Pierre, presumably in honor of Leon’s younger

⁴² Hanger, *Free Black Female Property-Holders in New Orleans*, 220.

⁴³ 1900 United States Federal Census [database on-line], (Ancestry.com), <http://www.ancestry.com/> (1900 United States Federal Census about Samuel Ball; accessed February 1, 2009).

brother.⁴⁴ If Leon was responsible for Pierre Barthé's introduction to the plastering trade, it is quite possible that he was also Pierre Barthé's introduction to New Orleans trade unionism, as Leon had been a union man for at least twenty years before Pierre Barthé and Sam Ball would establish Local 93 in 1901.

An 1882 article in the *Daily Picayune* mentions a special meeting of the Plasterers' Protective Union at Violet Hall at the corner of Common Street and Rampart Street in New Orleans.⁴⁵ The article covers a meeting in which rank and file plasterers challenged a decision to guarantee work bosses a supplemental wage for their supervisory responsibilities. The president of the union was John Whalen, an Irish immigrant laborer born in 1837.⁴⁶ By 1882, Leon had already been practicing his craft for at least twelve years, and indeed, Leon Barthé is mentioned as attending this special meeting and participating in points of order. Pierre Barthé would have been twenty-seven years old in 1882, and it would follow that if Leon was a member in good standing of the Plasterers' Protective Union, his brother would be as well.

The Barthés' participation in organized labor could be attributed to any of a number of possible causes. Earl A. Barthé suggests that Local 93 was born out of mutually recognized skill and expertise. If that were the case, however, then how would one explain the existence of this earlier union? Perhaps both unions were simply expressions of skilled proletarian economic

⁴⁴United States Federal Census 1880 [database online], (Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), <http://www.ancestry.com/> (1880 Federal Census about Leon Barthé; accessed February 12, 2009).

⁴⁵ "The Labor Leagues. The Plasterers Hold A Special Meeting To Receive Their Bosses," *Times Picayune*, published as *The Daily Picayune*; August 14, 1882, sec. Front Page, 1.

⁴⁶ United States Federal Census 1880 [database online], (Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), <http://www.ancestry.com/> (1880 Federal Census about John Whalen; accessed February 12, 2009).

protectionism. Clearly, the organized labor movement in the United States had gained momentum in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. There was an economic power in a union that individual proletarians could not compete against and that many could not survive without. The United States was just recovering from a bloody civil war fought, at least in part, over the issue of individual property rights versus federal regulation of the economy. Given the prevailing anti-regulatory sentiment, in politics and economics alike, organized labor represented the only means to confront the rampant exploitation and excesses that characterized American capitalism at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Barthés's participation in organized labor could have also been an expression of ideological affinity. Their father, after all, had been a Freemason with a commitment to "universal education and suffrage and the right of the working classes 'to a nobler position in society.'"⁴⁷ By joining with working-class Europeans and first-generation whites born to European immigrant parents, they may have also intended to affirm their humanity and their equality in the face of an American culture that was just as foreign (and often hostile) to them as it was to recently arrived white ethnics. Perhaps they participated in organized labor in the hope of engaging these immigrants before the process of Americanization had taken hold and before the evil of American racism had had a chance to take root.

Whatever their reasons, the Barthés did participate in the organized labor movement in New Orleans as early as 1882. Leon Barthé was a member of the Plasterer's Protective Union as was, most likely, his brother. Pierre's experience with the Plasterer's Protective Union would

⁴⁷ Robert B. Folger, *The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite in Thirty-Three Degrees, Annual Grand Communication* (New York: , 1862), 330-333; quoted in Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 181.

certainly inform his view as he parlayed the beginnings of Local 93 with Sam Ball in Jackson Square.

The existence of the Plasterers Protective Union suggests that there was already a decades-old history of cooperation between Afro-Creoles and the Irish in New Orleans by 1901. In light of this history, the establishment of Local 93 might not appear to be so remarkable. However, in a broader context of organized labor in New Orleans, the level of interracial cooperation in organized labor represented by Local 93 is extremely rare. In an even broader context of organized labor in the American South, Local 93 is miraculous.

The American South in 1900 was the land of Jim Crow and lynching. The American South was the land of the Klan. Louisiana certainly experienced its share of racial terrorism, and New Orleans was the site of some of the bloodiest episodes of racially motivated violence. However, it is important to understand that in 1900 there was an “American” New Orleans and a “Creole” New Orleans and the rules of one did not necessarily translate in the other.

Canal Street has been often identified as the dividing line between Creole New Orleans (downtown) and American New Orleans (uptown). Some scholars have disputed this claim, suggesting that if such a dividing line existed at all, that line might be farther into the French Quarter, but those scholars miss the point.⁴⁸ Canal Street was, in fact, a prestational border, and though that border was certainly permeable—as evidenced by the “American” influences in the French Quarter as well those instances of Creole artisanry in the Faubourg St. Marie (or, “the American Quarter”) and the Garden District—a border it was, nonetheless.

⁴⁸ Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., “Creoles and Americans,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

In “Creole” New Orleans in 1900, Afro-Creoles and whites had been participating for generations in institutions that defied American conventions of racial separation and antipathy. In “American” New Orleans in 1900, a working-class African American, born in Mississippi, named Robert Charles was involved in an altercation with police that rapidly escalated into a full-blown race riot, replete with mass slayings and random attacks on African-American bystanders. When the smoke from the gunshots cleared, Robert Charles’ dead body was literally dragged through the street by angry white mobs after he had succeeded in slaying twenty-seven white people.⁴⁹ Still, the cause for the establishment of Local 93 cannot be ascribed merely to the diminished impact of American racial paradigms in “Creole” New Orleans alone.

During the Civil War, many working-class whites in New Orleans either enlisted or were conscripted into the army, which allowed for many free blacks to take jobs previously unavailable to them to make up for the shortage of white labor. Immediately after the war, many of these black workers (and more too from the ranks of the recently freed slaves) moved into urban job markets where they found themselves in competition with white workers, some for the first time. In response, according to Eric Arnesen, New Orleans’ “white workers guarded their privileged position in the city’s employment hierarchy: black unskilled workers constituted a potential threat to their security, not potential allies in a larger struggle.”⁵⁰ This mentality would contribute to horrific episodes of racial violence on the waterfront in 1894, only two years after biracial union cooperation would inspire a general strike in New Orleans.

⁴⁹ William Ivy Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class and Politics, 1863-1923* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 32-33.

Having black workers who would be willing to work longer hours for lower wages and who could be called up as scab labor did not advance the agenda of white union workers. Eventually, as the organized labor movement began to gain momentum, a model of biracial union cooperation would manifest itself in a number of industries across the Southern United States, including New Orleans. This biracial union model consisted of a primary white union which was affiliated with a subordinate colored subdivision as opposed to an interracial union which would have represented all workers and which allowed officers of the union either to be chosen without regard to race or which at least guaranteed black representation in equal proportion to white representation among union officers. Imperfect as the biracial union model was, however, it proved sufficiently effective to support a general strike in New Orleans in 1892 that lasted for three days and was maintained by all workers, white and black, despite attempts by management to divide workers along racial lines.⁵¹

Covington Hall, born in 1871, was a prolific writer, journalist, poet, political agitator and organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or “Wobblies”) in New Orleans during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Through his memoir, Hall provides a wealth of insight into the

⁵¹ For the most comprehensive historiographical treatments of biracial unionism in New Orleans and other port cities, see Eric Arnesen’s “Race and labour in a Southern US port: New Orleans, 1860-1930,” in Sam Davies et al. (eds.) *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History, 1790-1970 vol. 1*, (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2000): 38-56; and Arnesen’s “Biracial Waterfront Unionism in the Age of Segregation,” in Calvin Winslow (ed.) *Waterfront Workers: New Perspectives on Race and Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998): 19-61. Also see Rick Halpern’s “Organized labour, black workers and the twentieth century South: the emerging revision,” *Social History* 19 (3) 1994: 359-83. Important monographic studies concerning biracial and interracial unionism during the early 1900s include Daniel Letwin’s *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coalminers, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) and McMartin’s *Labor’s Great War. For a comparative view of African-American railroad workers, see Eric Arnesen’s Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality*, (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2001).

culture of organized labor in New Orleans. He writes in *Labor Struggles in the Deep South* that “the IWW recognized neither race, color nor creed in its constitution but only the interests of the working class.”⁵² The IWW was certainly exceptional in this view, however, and Hall would often find himself at odds with the bosses of the mainstream unions in New Orleans at the turn of the century. For Hall, the racial segregation of AFL-model “craft unions” represented the perpetuation of an imperialist system that sought to oppress all working people.

It was the A.F. of L. that “scabbed” the Knights of Labor, the American Railway Union and the Western Federation of Miners out of existence. And this the A.F. of L. did because its leaders *did not wish to see the semi-skilled and unskilled workers organized*, believing that the organization of the semi-skilled and unskilled would end their petty special privileges as an “aristocracy of labor.” The history of craft unionism will, I think, fully bear out this charge that the craft union leaders did not wish to see the unorganized millions organized...[T]hey have sought to keep them “helpers” forever, to organize a “caste” and not a “class unionism.”⁵³

For Hall, the discriminatory segregation of biracial craft unionism was not conducive to the class solidarity necessary for the implementation of his Anarcho-syndicalist agenda. His criticism of dual unionism and racial segregation in organized labor was ideological.

Superficially, Local 93 could be understood as an expression of that same sort of radical ideology of racial equality and solidarity. In actuality, Local 93 more closely resembled the conservative AFL craft union model decried by Covington Hall.

Earl A. Barthé’s insistence that the foundation of Local 93 was conceived in recognition of skill and talent must be considered seriously. There is a significant and qualitative difference in the level of skill necessary to produce the intricately detailed, almost Baroque, works of art that Creole plasterers of New Orleans were known for, compared to the mere plastering of an interior

⁵² Covington Hall, *Labor Struggles in the Deep South & Other Writings* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1999), 101-102.

⁵³ *Ibid* p. 219

wall of a house so that it is level and smooth. Earl A. Barthé is a Master Craftsman Plasterer whose father was a Master Craftsman Plasterer, and who had two great uncles who were also Master Craftsman Plasterers. Examples of these men's work reflect a highly specialized skill and expertise that was jealously guarded as intellectual capital, passed down through families from one generation to the next. Earl Barthé describes his introduction to the plastering trade as an extension of his familial experience:

My father was a plasterer, his father was a plasterer, his uncles and everybody else were plasterers. The Barthé children just knew they had to be plasterers. Daddy didn't want me to be a doctor, a lawyer or an Indian chief. He wanted me to be a plasterer. I've been plastering all my life. When I was very young — oh, seven years old - Daddy would come in after working on a Saturday tell my brother and I to clean the tools. He would leave pennies and nickels in his toolbox and say, "Whatever you all find, that's for you." So we'd dig in that bag, cleaning the tools and looking for them pennies and nickels. We realized later that he was training us. He would say, "Earl, give me that pointing trowel." And I'd say, "Pointing trowel?" He would pick it up and say, "You see this little tool. This is a pointing trowel. When I ask you for that that's what I want you to give me." Then he would tell my brother, Harold, "Harold, give me the hawk." That was his way of educating us. There were no apprentice training classes at that time.⁵⁴

Below to the left is an image of Earl A. Barthé holding an example of an ornamental plasterwork corner-piece. The other images are examples of New Orleans Creole ornamental plasterwork at the Luling Mansion in New Orleans. At least three generations of Barthés have contributed to the plasterwork artistry of the Luling Mansion. These images serve to illustrate the

⁵⁴ Earl A. Barthé, "2005 NEA National Heritage Fellowships: Creole Building Artisan Interview With Mary Eckstein," *National Endowment For The Arts*, July, 2005, http://www.nea.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/interview.php?id=2005_02/ (accessed May 4, 2009).

difference between what these craftsmen were capable of and the comparatively simple task of applying plaster to a wall.



(Fig. 2)



(Fig 3)



(Fig. 4)



(Fig. 5)

The skill evidenced by these artifacts, referred to by Earl Barthé as “the talent,” constituted intellectual capital. This capital was jealously guarded by Afro-Creole plasterers in order to maintain a historical domination of the plastering trade in New Orleans. The techniques and methods of producing such intricate plaster designs and motifs were often passed down from father to son. Enjoining in solidarity with Irish Americans allowed Afro-Creoles to assert their equality with whites. Solidarity with African Americans would happen much later, in part due to racism or at the very least ethnocentrism. However, the decision to admit African Americans should also be seen as yet another manifestation of the same uplift ideology of racial equality that characterized the Afro-Creole protest tradition in the nineteenth-century.

CHAPTER V

ECONOMIC PROTECTIONISM, FAMILY, CLASS AND RACE

Herbert Gettridge was one of the first African Americans admitted to Local 93. Gettridge was born in New Orleans on August 31, 1923 and lived in New Orleans' Seventh Ward, an integrated yet majority Afro-Creole neighborhood, until 1952. His father was a longshoreman, and had worked at times as a screwman and as a muleskinner. His grandmother spoke New Orleans Creole French, as did all of her sisters, according to Gettridge, though he was never taught to identify himself as Creole. He was introduced to plastering by his neighbor, Louis Jeffrion, in 1934 when he was 10 or 11 years old. He started as a mortar mixer but after a year, he was "spreading plaster on walls."⁵⁵

Herbert Gettridge applied to join Local 93 in 1947 as a plasterer (as opposed to a modeler, shop hand, cement finisher or apprentice). The application for membership cost \$100 and the applicant was required to produce three union members in good-standing who were willing to vouch for him. Gettridge had the support of Etienne Jeanjacques, Herbert E. Oubre, and Herbert Smith.⁵⁶ In a 2009 interview, Gettridge recalled his entry into the union.

Getting into the union for me, it was like I was one of the lucky ones. Other than that, I would have had to be related to someone. To get in the union, you needed to have a father, grandfather or somebody related to you to get into the union. I got in through Louis Jeffrion...No one in my family was ever a plasterer or bricklayer or painter or

⁵⁵ Herbert Gettridge, interview by author, February 21, 2009, transcript.

⁵⁶ Membership application, Herbert Gettridge, 1947, folder, Box #29-113, OPCMIA Collection, UNO Special Collections.

anything like that [until me]...The apprenticeships were closed to anyone unless you were related.⁵⁷

It is very interesting that between 1938 and 1945, the name “Albertine Barthé” appears as beneficiary on three separate applications for admission to the union. Alexander Barthé, a plasterer re-applying to the union after having been dropped as a result of the Great Depression, lists Albertine Barthé as his wife. Alvin Martin Barthé and Henry Hamilton Barthé, both applicants to the union in 1945, list Albertine Barthé as their mother. Further scrutiny of union applications and membership rosters affirms Gettridge and Earl A. Barthé’s description of Local 93 as a collection of families.⁵⁸

However, the importance of familial connections in Local 93 extended beyond values and traditions. As Gettridge makes clear, in most cases, learning the trade at all required some familial connection. Learning the most complex techniques was impossible without the “right” family name. On job sites, Master Plasterers would offer no pretense when they would erect curtains or screens to keep their craft secrets safe from members of the union who did not have the required pedigree to be admitted into the Sanctum Sanctorum of Creole plastering artisanry.

Terry Barthé apprenticed as a plasterer in the early 1980’s, just before the union’s dissolution. She was one of a very small number of women admitted to the union after legalized gender discrimination was abolished with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. She was Earl A. Barthé’s daughter; if women were to be allowed into the union, then it would only make sense that they should come from one of the traditional plastering families. Terry Barthé explained the

⁵⁷ Herbert Gettridge, interview by author, February 21, 2009, transcript.

⁵⁸ Membership applications, folders, Box #29-113, OPCMIA Collection, UNO Special Collections.

difference between her treatment on the job and the treatment afforded to her fellow workers in a 2009 interview:

I apprenticed to Mr. Lawrence and he would take me on the side to show me things that he wouldn't show them [African American plasterers]. They weren't in the clique. They weren't in the right family...Daddy and Uncle Harold learned that way. They'd take you behind the curtain while the others they'd send off to fetch supplies or get lunch. You had to be connected to see what went on behind that curtain. And even then, you still had to have talent. If you didn't know what you were doing, they wouldn't pick you for the crew in the first place.⁵⁹

Herbert Gettridge was one of the lucky ones yet, he followed the traditional path of familial uplift. He paved the way for others. One year after he was admitted into the union, Gettridge vouched for his younger brother, Melin Arthur Gettridge, who would also be admitted.

Being in the union meant you couldn't get misused any kind of way...They couldn't force you to work on a Saturday or a Sunday without paying you double time. They couldn't work you overtime without paying you for it. I had four boys that were plasterers; I brought them all in...I paved the way for a lot of other youngsters my age. Guys working ice wagons: I put them in a mortar box and I taught them how to get out of the mortar box too.⁶⁰

The guarantee of fair wages was not the only benefit of membership in Local 93, however. At one time, according to Earl A. Barthé, there were more plasterers in New Orleans' Seventh Ward than there were in the rest of state of Louisiana.⁶¹ This concentration of intellectual capital would eventually translate into a sort of "brand identity" and by the middle of the twentieth century, the reputation of New Orleans plasterers extended far beyond the Crescent City. In financially tough times, plasterers from New Orleans would often travel to other cities to

⁵⁹ Terry Barthé, interview by author, June 7, 2009, transcript.

⁶⁰ Herbert Gettridge, interview by author, February 21, 2009, transcript.

⁶¹ Earl A. Barthé, "Interview 5.30.07," *Rebuilding New Orleans One Voice at a Time: Earl A. Barthé*, (New Orleans: New Orleans PodCasting, 2007), QuickTime podcast, <http://neworleanspodcasting.com/EarlBarthé.shtml/> (accessed May 4, 2009).

ply their trade. According to Earl A. Barthé, the New Orleans plasterer's "brand" enjoyed considerable recognition.

New Orleans produces without any question some of the finest plasterers in the country. Without question! It's been proven over and over and time and again. One story that I can remember so well, I was a young man working, and they didn't have any work here [in New Orleans] so we went to Alabama, Mobile I think it was, and there was a housing project. So when we get there they must have had about 40 or 50 plasterers at the shack trying to wait to get jobs....[O]ne of the supervisors walked out there and seen our license plate and says "you from Louisiana? New Orleans?" We said yes. He said, "Well, you come on in." So all that might sound good, but after we get in there, they hired us immediately to do all the finish work. I said "Man, we might get lynched out there." There might be 50 people out there waiting for a job, but just the idea that we were from New Orleans and that's not only in Alabama, it was New York, California, Illinois. If you said you were a plasterer from New Orleans, nine out of ten times, you would get a job, no question.⁶²

Herbert Gettridge gives a similar account of the deference afforded to plasterers from New Orleans when traveling to other parts of the country.

Things got bad here [in New Orleans] from '54 to '57, so I went to Chicago. I was up there, making money and sending it back home. Whenever things got bad here though, you could go anywhere and get work. I worked for Tom Callahan out of Local 5 in Chicago. When we got to Chicago, there was a man who said we had to take a test. But then Callahan says "these guys don't need no test. They're from New Orleans!"⁶³

The signified value of the New Orleans plasterer brand identity, the result of the intellectual capital of these Master Craftsmen and Artisans, is the "talent" that Earl A. Barthé suggests that the founders of Local 93 "couldn't let go" of. It is this capital that was kept "behind the curtain" by Afro-Creole plasterers who jealously guarded their trade secrets. It is this capital that allowed Afro-Creoles in Jim Crow New Orleans to negotiate as equals (if not as superiors) with white Irishmen and Irish-Americans. Herbert Gettridge was one of the lucky ones who were allowed to engage these craftsmen in fellowship but prior to Gettridge, African Americans were

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Herbert Gettridge, interview by author, February 21, 2009, transcript.

shut out of the union, partially as a result of protective practices meant to prevent these Afro-Creole plastering techniques from falling into hands outside of a select few families.

Though Earl A. Barthé, and many of his generation as well, was not fluent in Creole French, many of the “old timers” during the 1940’s and 1950’s still spoke “that gumbo-Creole French” on the job.⁶⁴ Even after African Americans were allowed into the union, the use of New Orleans Creole French to communicate with one another allowed for a natural barrier which allowed Afro-Creoles to maintain their own “inner circle.” It is not hard to imagine that this language barrier was consciously engaged by these Afro-Creole plasterers especially considering the very real manifestations of racism that characterized Afro-Creole attitudes toward African Americans.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that racist discrimination against African Americans did not exist in Local 93. Aside from economic protectionism, Afro-Creole plasterers’ decision to restrict African-American access to union membership was also motivated by racism. Though the Latin culture of downtown New Orleans allowed for more fluid definitions of race and for less oppressive social relationships, it was not free of prejudice and bigotry. Judgments based on a complex combination of skin color, hair texture and European facial features certainly played a role in the marginalization of African Americans even after African Americans were allowed in the union. A dark skinned man with straight hair might not have any problem. A fair skinned man with coarse hair might not have a problem either. When Herbert Gettridge recalls that he was one of the lucky ones, it is because, in his words, “a dark fella like me...with hair like me,

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

you wouldn't get in. Among the Creoles, there was discrimination. I can't say why...That's just the way it was back then."⁶⁵

Just as Afro-Creoles were compelled to bring in Irish-Americans decades earlier in order to maintain their control over the trade in New Orleans, the union's participation in the modern Civil rights movement and other pressures compelled them to open up the union to African-Americans. Clearly, Gettridge and others benefited in tangible ways from working a union job despite limitations on their advancement symbolized on the job site by language and familial barriers, and, to a lesser degree, skin color and religion. Such limits experienced by the first African-Americans hired in the 1940s and 1950s were still in effect decades later when Terry Barthé entered the trade. Yet, for many of the African-American members of the union the benefits of union membership outweighed the negatives. From the perspective of those in the inner sanctum, these limitations and the need to allow outsiders into the trade echo the social conditions that forced the Afro-Creoles to adapt by working closely with the Irish decades beforehand.

CONCLUSION

Local 93 is an important yet overlooked part of American labor history. For whatever racist discrimination there may have been in the Plasterer's union in New Orleans, Local 93 still remains perhaps the earliest AFL-affiliated labor union to be racially integrated. Given the divisive racial climate of the time of its founding, especially in New Orleans, the level of interracial cooperation represented by Local 93 cannot and should not be discounted or

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

diminished. The historical significance of Pierre Barthé and Sam Ball's decision to join together cannot be diminished.

In her introduction to *Raising Freedom's Child*, Mary Niall Mitchell observes that postcard images of white-skinned slave children served to invoke a number of questions as to their fate once all people of color became free.⁶⁶ By the same token, we might ask what would happen to these Afro-Creole people after emancipation? The story of Local 93 provides at least one answer to that question: through whatever means at their disposal they would continue to fight for social and political equality. Though they would "look after their own first," eventually they would pave the way for social and political equality for all black people in the United States of America.

⁶⁶ Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 1-10

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Images

(Figure 1) "The Ignorant Vote—Honors Are Easy," *Harper's Weekly*, December 9, 1876, cover illustration by Thomas Nast, acquired online at http://cartoons.osu.edu/nast/ignorant_vote.htm.

(Figure 2) Earl A. Barthé image taken from National Endowment for the Arts website, July, 2005. http://www.nea.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/interview.php?id=2005_02/ (accessed May 4, 2009). The image is also available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earl_Barth%C3%A9.

(Figure 3) Digital image taken by author at the Luling Mansion, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 7, 2009.

(Figure 4) Digital image taken by author at the Luling Mansion, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 7, 2009.

(Figure 5) Digital image taken by author at the Luling Mansion, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 7, 2009.

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VITA

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